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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 002176

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SUBJECT: GEORGIA: SERIOUS INCIDENTS, FATALITIES ON THE RISE

Classified By: Ambassador John F. Tefft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. Recent weeks have seen an increase in the number and severity of boundary-line incidents, including several fatalities. The one exception is Perevi, where the withdrawal of Ossetian forces reduced tensions -- although Russian forces still occupy a checkpoint outside South Ossetia and control access to the village. The arrival of Ossetian forces at other formerly Russian checkpoints has created a new potential source of tension, however. The seemingly deliberate nature of several of these incidents suggests that there are forces in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia trying to foment instability. End summary and comment.

South Ossetia: Explosions, Shootings and Checkpoints

¶2. (SBU) Two recent incidents on the edges of South Ossetia involving explosive devices reflect intentional mischief. On November 17, two Georgian police officers were killed and eight individuals wounded, including two children, in one of two separate incidents involving apparent aerial devices. The OSCE reported one device landed in Kere (just outside the administrative boundary, east of Tskhinvali); it was found and removed by Interior Ministry personnel with no further incident. Another device landed in nearby Plavi. It was found and removed by Interior Ministry personnel to what they thought was a more secure location in the village, but it then detonated, killing two and wounding eight. Explosives were apparently packed into a compartment designed to hold a camera. The OSCE had not seen any such device before. The Interior Ministry said in a public statement that the device was detonated remotely; the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) thought it might have been detonated accidentally by the officers.

¶3. (SBU) On November 10, two Georgian police officers were killed by an explosive device rigged to a South Ossetian flag placed in Dvani, outside South Ossetia, and three others were wounded in a second explosion. The OSCE noted similar booby traps were used in Northern Ireland and demonstrate a clear intent to harm.

¶4. (C) Two recent incidents involving sniper attacks likewise seem to reflect deliberate targeting on both sides. The OSCE reported that on November 5, a sniper's bullet did not injure, but hit the collar of a Georgian police officer in Zemo Nikozi, just outside the administrative boundary south of Tskhinvali. Also on November 5, South Ossetian press reported that a sniper from outside South Ossetia shot and killed a South Ossetian man, Oleg Disev, while he was driving his car near the village of Korkula. In a November 20 briefing for the diplomatic corps, the EUMM noted that they had collected evidence that Georgian Interior Ministry forces had at their disposal a Brugger and Thomet sniper rifle, with silencer. The EUMM characterized this as an offensive weapon and expressed concern that it was not in keeping with its discussions with the Georgians about the types of weapons --

defensive ones -- that Georgian forces would deploy in the areas adjacent to South Ossetia.

15. (SBU) Other incidents may not reflect planned attacks, but highlight the tense atmosphere around the administrative boundary. On November 19, for example, a car carrying officials from the South Ossetian de facto prosecutor's office set out for Ksuisi, a village inside South Ossetia, to investigate a murder. On the way, however, the car took a turn that led them out of the South Ossetia, and it encountered a Georgian checkpoint. The Georgians reportedly fired warning shots, which led to an exchange of gunfire; one Ossetian official was seriously injured. Noting the confusing nature of the roads in the villages, the OSCE suggested it was quite possible that the car took the road out of South Ossetia by mistake. Whatever the reason for the wrong turn, neither side appeared comfortable enough to approach each and discuss the situation, but rather turned immediately to their guns. The night of November 12 and 13, extended gunfire occurred across the administrative boundary near the village of Koshka; no one was reported injured. The Interior Ministry told the OSCE that the shooting came in one direction only, from South Ossetia into undisputed Georgian territory. The OSCE was unable to confirm this.

16. (SBU) Over the past few weeks, the EUMM and OSCE have observed that Ossetian forces have begun taking over checkpoints from Russian forces. At the November 20 briefing, the EUMM noted that Ossetians have assumed control of checkpoints near Knolevi, Ergneti, Monasteri and Odzisi; in the case of Monasteri, the checkpoint has been moved to nearby Mskhlebi. Neither organization has reported any

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specific incidents related to these changes of command, but both noted that the change increases the potential for direct confrontation between Ossetians and Georgians.

17. (SBU) One situation that has improved is that of Perevi, where Ossetian forces departed the checkpoint between November 15 and 16 in favor of Russian forces once again. On November 18 representatives of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees entered Perevi, and the OSCE entered on November 19, under Russian escort. Estimates vary, but the OSCE thought 60% of the population remained in the village, and about 20% of students were back in class; the OSCE called the security situation in the village good. The OSCE also planned to meet with Russian forces to discuss the establishment of contacts between Russian officials and local administrative officials. The EUMM noted that villagers expressed concerns about their fields, some of which they said had been incorporated by Ossetian de facto authorities into South Ossetian territory. Without access to their crops, the villagers thus face a difficult winter, and their future livelihood is also in question.

Abkhazia: Shooting, Explosions and Harassment

18. (SBU) Three recent incidents near Abkhazia suggest intentional efforts by Abkhaz forces to attack or provoke the Georgian side. On November 20, two heavy exchanges of fire occurred near Ganmukhuri, outside Abkhazia but north of the Enguri River, at 0630 and 0905, each lasting about 10 minutes. UNOMIG found that all of the exchanges occurred entirely outside the administrative boundary in undisputed Georgian territory. No injuries were reported, although one of the Abkhaz targets seemed to be a Georgian Interior Ministry post. UNOMIG reports rocket-propelled grenades, machine guns and small arms were used in the exchanges, and two armored vehicles were used on the Abkhaz side; UNOMIG was unable to determine who manned the vehicles. It is not clear what initiated the exchanges, although Georgian Interior Ministry sources called the first one a coordinated attack by Abkhaz forces. Georgian press reported that the Abkhaz forces left mines in their positions as they departed; UNOMIG

confirmed the presence of anti-personnel mines, but noted that they were set with tripwires, would have demanded some time to set. UNOMIG therefore speculated that Abkhaz forces came into the area under cover of darkness, over the night of November 19-20, and lay the mines at that time; UNOMIG also speculated that discovery of these Abkhaz forces may have led to the shooting. UNOMIG also reported two Russian helicopters overhead during the second exchange, one MI-8 and one MI-24.

¶9. (SBU) On November 15, the Georgian Interior Ministry received reports of individuals being detained while trying to cross the border into Abkhazia in the vicinity of Kalagali, a village just outside the administrative boundary, north of the Enguri River and northwest of Tsalenjikha. Officers went to investigate, and while in the area came under fire from unidentified forces in the woods. One Georgian police officer was killed by a shot to the head. EUMM and UNOMIG were informed and sent patrols to the scene to investigate. At about 1515, heavy firing erupted, although no one was injured. A UNOMIG investigation found several hundred shells of four different calibers in the area. Although Abkhaz press quoted de facto authorities as Qarea. Although Abkhaz press quoted de facto authorities as saying that the Interior Ministry forces were inside Abkhazia, both EUMM and UNOMIG found that all of the events occurred outside, though close to, the boundary. UNOMIG found one and possibly two firing positions on a hill overlooking the area and determined that the attack was likely planned in advance.

¶10. (SBU) On November 14, an explosion damaged an electric transformer in Muzhava, shutting off power to three local villages. UNOMIG reported that some kind of improvised explosive device caused the explosion, possibly detonated remotely. The EUMM noted that two cows were killed as well. As of November 20, villagers in Muzhava and Eritskali told UNOMIG they still did not have power.

¶11. (SBU) The situation along the boundary has become more tense in other ways as well. UNOMIG has received several reports of documents, including passports, being seized at the boundary by both Abkhaz and Russian forces and either removed to a regional office, where individuals have to make a special request for their return, or destroyed. UNOMIG has also received reports of Abkhaz forces seizing and burning Georgian-language textbooks. Both EUMM and UNOMIG continue to receive reports of difficulties individuals face in crossing the boundary. EUMM itself remains unable to enter Abkhazia. On November 4, an EUMM patrol entered Abkhazia

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near Eritskali; shortly after it crossed the boundary, Russian and Abkhaz forces forced the monitors to depart Abkhazia at gun point. Abkhaz de facto officials told EUMM Head of Mission Haber in Geneva on November 18 that they would not allow EU monitors into Abkhazia. UNOMIG continues to have freedom of movement for the most part, but it has encountered resistance as well. Both Russian and Abkhaz forces confronted a UNOMIG patrol in a "particularly hostile manner" throughout their patrol through the Gali sector on November 19. An Abkhaz drew his weapon at a UNOMIG patrol on November 15 near Saberio, about which UNOMIG complained to a regional commander; the next day the personnel at that same checkpoint were "unusually polite."

An Attack Taxonomy

¶12. (SBU) The deputy head of the EUMM offered at the November 20 briefing his analysis of recent incidents. He saw three types of events occurring. First, attacks designed to destroy property and complicate the life of residents; the explosion of the transformer in Muzhava is an example. Second, inadvertent escalation of confrontations between forces on the two sides, such as the exchanges of fires near Kalagali. (Note: Post is not convinced that the Abkhaz

presence near Kalagali was either inadvertent or benign and would suggest the incident near Mereti is a better example of this category. End note.) Third, intentional, malicious attacks designed to kill or maim, such as the booby-trapped flag or the UAVs; he saw these types of events as the most pernicious.

Comment: A Deliberate Increase in Tension

¶13. (C) All international observers agree that the last two weeks have seen an increase in the frequency and severity of incidents along the boundary line. The EUMM's three categories probably reflect different motivations for violence, but it is noteworthy that incidents in all three categories seem to be on the rise. Even though some of the incidents can be attributed to the inherent danger of having armed enemies in close proximity to each other, it seems clear that there are parties inside Abkhazia and South Ossetia trying to increase tensions and stir up trouble.
TEFFT